

OCCASIONAL PAPERS  
ON THE HISTORY OF  
BOSTON COLLEGE

# THE SPIRIT MAKETH ALIVE

An Early Protestant View  
of Boston College



Rev. Charles F. Donovan, S.J.  
University Historian  
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Gasson Hall was dedicated in March 1913, and the senior class finished the year in the new building. The next fall all four classes climbed the hill from Lake Street for instruction in Maginnis and Walsh's Gothic structure. Two years elapsed. The people of Newton, Brookline, and Brighton—as well as commuters along Beacon Street and Commonwealth Avenue—were getting accustomed to Boston College's tower on the skyline, when a Protestant journalist ventured onto the campus and seems to have fallen at least mildly in love with what he saw. The result of his visit was an article with the provocative title, "Chestnut Hill's Touch of Oxford. A Near View of the Unappreciated Architectural Splendors of Boston College." It appeared in the *Boston Saturday Evening Transcript*. The article reveals as much about the social milieu of Boston at the time and the relations between Protestants and Catholics or between Boston Brahmin and Irish populations as it does about Father Gasson's masterpiece.

The author expressly, if somewhat playfully, addresses himself to the Protestant community and feels obliged to introduce Boston College to them. He invites his religious confreres to "walk boldly" onto the campus, where they will be pleased to observe the "charming Irish courtesy" of the place and the "consecrated pluck" that drives it. The author's perspective on the student body and academic pursuits at Boston College were particularly refreshing. One must remember that only

a half century had passed since Father John McElroy had struggled mightily against anti-Catholic prejudice just to acquire land on which to build a school. Now, here was someone in the Boston daily press saying to its Protestant readers, in effect, that these Catholics were perfectly normal people, and that they went about the education of their children in basically the same way that Protestants themselves did.

It is interesting to have this description of the campus when the Recitation Building (as Gasson Hall was originally called) was the only completed building and to recall that in 1915 the "Faculty Residence" (St. Mary's Hall) was "an affair of derricks, scaffolds, and tawny gray walls of but a quarter of their intended height." The Jesuit brother mentioned in the article who did the paintings in the rotunda, over the stage in the assembly hall, and elsewhere in Gasson Hall, was Brother Francis Schroen. He did similar art work at Georgetown and Fordham and for several Jesuit churches. The author has a few reservations, hinting that the good lay brother may have had more holiness than artistic ability, and finding the tower of Gasson somewhat broad and heavy. But, on the whole, his appraisal both of the first Chestnut Hill building and of Father Gasson's plan for the development of the campus is warmly enthusiastic.

The author was Rollin Lynde Hartt, a staff columnist of the *Transcript*, and his article appeared on October 30, 1915. Were Hartt alive today he would be happy to know that his prediction of the permanent dominance of Gasson Hall has been sustained. When plans were afoot to erect the University's most massive academic structure, O'Neill Library, in the shadow of Gasson, there might have been a threat to the original building's preeminence. But sensitive planning by architects and campus advisors provided a library so positioned and shaped that it proclaims its great mission without challenging Gasson's tower as the University's signature. Following is the text of Hartt's article:

This is not written for Catholics, and they will please keep out, for we Protestants hate to be laughed at. Bland-

ly we have gone on—fifty years, now—calling Boston College an ‘‘oh yes, one of those places where they turn out Catholic priests.’’ Even to-day, while the institution on University Heights in Newton is inaugurating its new athletic field in a blaze of glory, you will hear passing automobilists comment, naively, ‘‘Why, it might be almost any college crowd almost anywhere! We thought students for the Catholic ministry wore cassocks.’’ Which indicates once again that the laugh is on us.

And more properly than ever before. When Boston College hid in Harrison avenue there was some measure of excuse for the prevalent notion among Protestants. At present—well, hardly. With that lordly tower dominating the eminence above the Chestnut Hill Reservoir and visible in all its splendor for miles around, the establishment’s newer conspicuousness should make the most self-satisfied ignoramus ask what, as a matter of fact, Boston College is. A Catholic divinity school? Not in the least. If you fancy there are black-robed seminarists walking meekly, two and two, beneath its Gothic vaults or kneeling in a dim chapel with candles on the altar, you will as reasonably look for that sort of thing at Amherst or Williams. Then what is Boston College? Answer: A College. Not a boy there is making himself a priest—though, out of 525 students, there are many who will study for the priesthood later on, just as at Williams and Amherst there are many who will by and by study at some Protestant divinity school.

Naturally, this revelation brings a smile when a Catholic reads it. But the facts are put strongly, in order to combat a fixed idea. Apparently, we Protestants accept the principle of a Baptist, Methodist, or Episcopal college, which turns out bachelors of arts and cannot by any means turn out bachelors of divinity, but balk at the notion of a Catholic college doing the same thing. It is high time we left off the follies. Nor is this difficult. Walk boldly in from Commonwealth Avenue, and see for yourselves, Catholics don’t bite. On the contrary, they receive you with a charming Irish courtesy, sufficient reward in itself for your coming, while there are other rewards, some romantic, some aesthetic, some moral—moral, that is, in the sense that you feel a tingle of enthusiasm over the fine, manly struggle that has made the institution what it is and braves the future with a spirit of consecrated pluck very splendid to observe.

The mere walk from Commonwealth Avenue toward the magnificent Recitation Building—the one with the tower, of course, for the Faculty Residence on your left is still an affair of derricks, scaffolds, the tawny gray walls of but a quarter their intended height—has thrills you never suspected. How that majestic pile gains in beauty as you come nearer and gets its noble lines foreshortened! You might almost be strolling within the Cathedral Close at Canterbury and looking up at a wealth of Gothic loveliness and grace. To call it “one of the sights of Boston” is no extravagance. Nor do you wonder that the Catholics boast of choosing “the finest campus in America.” From that undulated hillside, where twenty collegiate structures of the same tawny gray stone are to be grouped in dignified harmony when the plans are carried to completion, you look out across the twin lakes, the wooded shores, the Brookline ridges and hillocks, and, far on beyond, the dim perspective of Boston, where a faint, ghostlike campanile, the Custom House tower, seems hanging in the air.

Behind the Recitation Building, and at the foot of a steep incline, lies the newly finished athletic field, with its tracks, its “gridiron” and “diamond” and its temporary grandstand—a capital place to meet an undergraduate who will do the honors by presenting you to a Jesuit professor.

You are not surprised that Catholic youths prefer to study under such teachers as these, or that they will make daily pilgrimages from South Boston, Lowell, and even Providence for the privilege. It takes grit, though. As yet, Boston College has no dormitories, no community life for its undergraduates, and no place to lodge them anywhere near the campus. And they are not only fighting distance; a great share of them are fighting poverty. So, to a serious extent, is the institution. To be sure, the priests who serve as professors have no salaries, but fully half the students receive instruction free of charge while the regular tuition fee is only sixty dollars a year. The college is not a money-maker (what college is?) and its expenses and equipment represent continued sacrifices and struggle.

No doubt the boys who choose Boston College instead of a secular university are influenced more or less by “social suggestion.” In Harrison Avenue there is still an immense Catholic high school with thirteen hundred

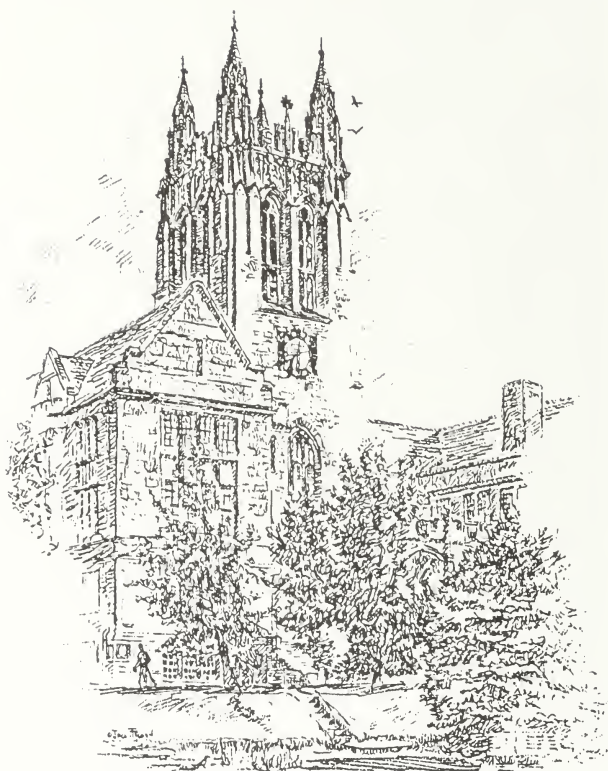
pupils. This explains the two telephone numbers opposite Boston College in the directory. The high school belongs to the college, and a stormy current sets from Harrison avenue to University Heights. But deterrents are nevertheless to be reckoned with. Matriculating at Boston College means giving up a lot that a boy could obtain elsewhere. There is as yet no gymnasium building. Fraternity houses are conspicuous by their absence. "College life" hardly exists. And the new "plant" is as yet without a chapel. The controlling motive, then, is apparent enough—to study in a Catholic atmosphere under Catholic professors and receive Catholic doctrine and moral instruction along with the usual courses leading to the bachelor's degree.

But while it is a severely abbreviated "plant," at this stage, few institutions have ever attempted anything more sumptuous, architecturally, than the English Gothic triumph at University Heights. Even in embryo, it is Oxford and Cambridge without their grime. One misses the grime, and yet is there not a civilized, refreshing decency in clean halls, newly chiselled groinings, and interiors whose lavishly decorated walls are still taking on the radiance of soft gold and undimmed color? Step in, and judge.

You are startled at first. So used have you become to associating dull hues with the gothic, that you forget how gorgeous were the "Dark" Ages and how daring the original color-schemes their architects supplied—precedent and to spare for what has been accomplished here. Inside the great tower and offsetting the gray of stone pillars and arches, color gleams resplendent, with lavish use of a pale, greenish gold and a rich and all but redundant profuseness in design. Gothic? In detail, perhaps not. In adherence to strictly mediaeval standards, assuredly not. You recall Viollet-le-Duc's restoration of the Sainte-Chapelle, and remind yourself that it was not in the least like this. Possibly your aesthetic traditionalism growls within you, till you wonder if the architects are not tearing their hair. Patience! The more you study those radiant decorations, the more it seems to you that they reflect the spirit of the Middle Ages.

And so they do, in a way you little dreamed. All the mural embellishments here, all those in the library, all those in the sumptuous assembly hall, and plenty more besides, are the work of a lay brother, who though not





Hartt felt Gasson tower was a trifle too ornate and a bit too broad and heavy for the building it adorns. Had he lived with it for four years as do undergraduates or for decades as do faculty members and staff, perhaps he would have modified his first judgment.

*The sketches are part of a series of drawings of campus buildings by artist Jack Frost. They were published in *Crowned Hilltop*, a volume that was Cardinal Richard Cushing's centennial gift to his alma mater. Francis Sweeney, S.J., provided text for the book.*





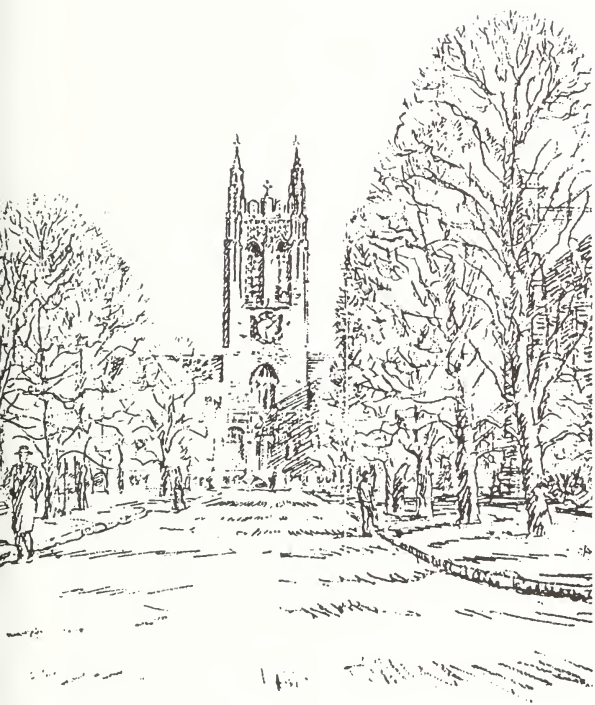
The Rotunda of Gasson Hall is today as it was when Rollin Hartt inspected it in 1915. In the center is the massive statue depicting the Archangel Michael overcoming Lucifer. In the rotunda bays are statues of St. Ignatius Loyola and the three youthful Jesuit saints — Aloysius Gonzaga, Stanislaus Kostka, and John Berchmans. Above the rotunda's arches are four murals by the Jesuit Brother Francis C. Shroen showing St. Ignatius with his future Jesuit companions at the University of Paris; Father Jacques Marquette, S.J., first European to reach the Mississippi River; Father Pierre Biard, S. J., offering the first Mass in New England on the Island of Mount Desert, Maine; and Father Athanasius Kircher, S.J., famous scientist.



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This sketch shows the approach to the original tower building as Hartt saw it, except that the linden trees were not at that height in 1915 and, as he said, St. Mary's Hall was only partly completed.

ordained, belongs to the Jesuit order and labors for the salvation of his soul and to the glory of God. Up yonder on his scaffold, you will see him, a very modern-looking artisan in overalls—prosaic, frankly, yet with a mission like that of the Twelfth Century craftsmen, whose workmanship in stone, wood, and jeweled glass lives after them in the European cathedrals and was prompted by the same devout motive.



What matter, then, if the lay brother is in some minor respects more a saint than an artist? "The letter killeth, the spirit maketh alive," and the spirit is perfect. There are higher harmonies than the literal ones. For that matter, sufficient harmony is already a foregone achievement in the great architectural scheme for University Heights. You begin to realize even now. If the tower that crowns the Recitation Building has appeared a trifle too ornate for the rest of the structure, the elaborate gothic traceries adorning the new Faculty Residence relieve the effect by carrying a note of lavishness over into an adjoining edifice. And if the tower has seemed rather too broad and heavy for the building it surmounts,

you perceive that it is meant to dominate the entire group.

A noble group it will be, with its tawny gray halls set well apart, with lawns and open spaces between, and abundant opportunity for landscape gardening. In general, the composition is that of the new Tech or of the Harvard Medical School, only on a vaster scale and without the need of packing the separate structures close together, much less putting them under one roof. As the domed building at Tech and the colonnaded building at the Harvard Medical School are the "clous" of their group, so is the towered building at Boston College. It will remain the "clou" even when the gymnasium, the laboratories, the dormitories, and the additional recitation halls provided for are outdone in both size and splendor by the church that is to give Commonwealth avenue a "monument," as the Parisians say, and a reminder of their stately Notre Dame.

Hartt was cordial—even benign—not only to the newcomers to Chestnut Hill but also towards what we now appropriately know as Gasson Hall. His ecumenical essay is a gem of generous Protestant outreach to an ascending Catholic minority as well as a classic expression of a layman's appreciation of the wonders fashioned by Maginnis and Walsh.

To give a balancing perspective on the Protestant-Catholic gap referred to by Rollin Hartt at the beginning of his article, the author of this Occasional Paper can aver that, about five years after the article appeared, he was old enough to know of the existence of the *Transcript*. From family remarks he knew it was a Yankee paper, therefore unfriendly to Catholics and therefore not allowed in the house. As he grew older the author came to think of the *Transcript* as a respected though stodgy paper which probably did not carry comics. He never saw it except on newsstands. It was still off limits because it was Yankee or Protestant. So seventy-five years after the engaging article on Boston College in the *Transcript*, testimony is given that the Protestant-Catholic rift Hartt regretted was a two-way rift.

Rollin Lynde Hartt's 1915 *Transcript* article is another precious bit of Boston College history

rescued from quiet archives. May Hartt's kind judgment on Brother Schroen be a benediction on Boston College today: "The Spirit Maketh Alive."

## APPENDIX

There are two other recorded reactions to the new Chestnut Hill campus, written before Hartt's and by no means as sociologically significant as his. But, like Hartt's article, they are fugitive bits of the College's past that perhaps deserve a modern audience.

On January 6, 1907, Father Thomas Ignatius Gasson became the thirteenth president of Boston College. It had been agreed among the Jesuits since at least 1900 that a move out of the South End by the College was called for. Since Father Gasson's term of office was to be only six years and action was needed, he acted. Before his first year in office expired, on December 12, 1907, legal papers were passed on the Chestnut Hill property. The size and beauty of the new campus and its location in one of the most prestigious neighborhoods in Greater Boston thrilled alumni, students, and friends of Boston College. Student response was immediate.

One month after the epochal land acquisition, the January 1908 issue of *The Stylus*, the student paper, had several articles about the new property. One was an editorial by Joseph F. O'Sullivan, editor. He rightly saluted the vision and courage of those who built the South End College fifty years before. He correctly commented on the failure of the South End to blossom into an elite residential area like the Back Bay and, with classical and literary allusions, he hailed the move westward. He dared to call the new campus a fitting site for a new Parthenon. But in 1908 he could have had no idea of the architectural jewel that would rise on Chestnut Hill. O'Sullivan wrote:

Times change and we with them, runs the old proverb. Nearly fifty years ago, the present site of Boston College was the land of promise for Catholic education. We who look at the College buildings now, and think them small for their requirements can hardly imagine how mighty a work they made for those who planned their founding. It was a heroic task. The site in those days was in the line of the city's residential growth; but



after a few years the march of residences went to the Back Bay and the suburbs.

Now again—as westward the course of empire has its way—the site for the new buildings is on the line of Boston's most promising growth—there above the picturesque reservoirs, between Beacon street and Commonwealth avenue. Glimpses of the Roman Campagna—as Ruskin saw it—are there, and there, too, are bits of scenery equal to portions of the far-famed Lakes of Killarney. How some old architect of Athens would have chosen the place to set thereon a building like the Parthenon! The Romans would have put the palaces of the Palatine upon it. We of a later age—if not as art-loving as our classic elders of Rome and Athens—will vow our devotion to our Alma Mater. Out of our purses just now there is not much to give; out of our hearts we can give priceless treasures.

The second article was longer and more intimate, since it recorded student impressions of their first visit to the future site of the College. It was written by John T. O'Hare, who on the masthead of *The Stylus* was regularly responsible for a section of the magazine called "Domi," a Latin title that means "At Home." A regular feature of the magazine from its inception in 1881, "Domi" concerned itself with items of domestic interest, including accounts of important visitors to the College, publications by teachers, and special liturgies for feast days. In it John O'Hare gave this account of a student excursion to the campus-to-be at Chestnut Hill:

On the last day of the old year Mr. Earls, S.J.,<sup>1</sup> and Mr. Miley, S. J., with a party of boys from the High School, spent the entire day at the new college grounds. They prepared their mid-day meal camp fashion in the spacious, open hearths of the old homestead, and the boys passed the day playing games about the grounds and in the groves, while the big, roomy barn proved an excellent basketball court.

<sup>1</sup> The Mr. (rather than Rev.) before the names Earls and Miley indicate that these were Jesuit scholastics—that is, not yet ordained.



During the day several of the college fellows appeared, and in the afternoon Captain O'Kane of this year's track team, who lives close by, brought over enough balls, bats, mitts, and gloves to equip a baseball nine and they engaged in what was probably the first, though not a formal, baseball practice on the new grounds. All were fascinated with the place and well might they be, for there is a comfortable, home-like feeling about it that makes one loath to leave. On the return home many pleasant compliments were paid Fr. Gasson on the wisdom and good sense of his selection of land for the new college.

Of course this new site cannot be seen to best advantage at this bleak and desolate season of the year. To see it at its best we must wait till the coming of spring, when the grass begins to push its green blades up through the softening earth and flower and leaf unfold in all their vernal vigor and beauty.

In expectation of all this the members of the present Senior class are planning to take possession of the new grounds for their class day exercises which shall include the planting of ivy and all the other events which are possible to graduates of an institution having extensive grounds.

Under the new order of things *The Stylus* will be very amply provided for, as it is intended that the cosy, little gate lodge of four or five rooms at the Beacon street entrance shall be given over to the future editors of our beloved college journal.

Though we of today feel somewhat envious of them, still we cordially congratulate them and pray to be admitted to the hospitality of the "sanctum" if we should call out there in future years.

The "Domi" article went on to tell of the preparations for a mass meeting sponsored by the alumni to be held on January 20 in the College Hall to inaugurate a drive for funds to pay for the new property and erect the first building. There were other references to the mass meeting in the January 1908 issue of *The Stylus*, including a speech written by a sophomore as part of a class exercise, done by all at one sitting, as a model for what a student might say on the occasion of the upcoming meeting. It is clear that the whole institution—high school,

college, and faculty—were caught up in a mood of excited anticipation at the news of the purchase of the Chestnut Hill property.

Going back to the “Domi” article, this is perhaps the only firsthand description we have of the original Lawrence house and barn when acquired by Boston College. We should note the mild weather that greeted the lads on December 31, 1907, enabling them to play baseball in the afternoon. While those of us who have lived through some “winter wonderland” seasons at the Heights might take exception to the comment about “this bleak and desolate season of the year,” we can certainly agree with the author’s anticipation of the “vernal vigor and beauty” of spring. The students of 1908 were hardly bashful. *The Stylus* staff had already (in their own minds) preempted as their editorial offices the gate lodge that stood by the Beacon Street entrance. That lodge, later called Hancock House, has recently given way to an extension on Campion Hall. No student activity was ever located in the lodge.

Had Rollin Hartt seen a copy of the January 1908 *Stylus* he would have been confirmed in his judgment that Boston College students were just like “any college crowd almost anywhere.”





Rose Mary Donahue  
BotoLph House

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